



# Behind the Curtain: Student-Centered Communication Strategies in Financial Aid

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**IASFAA Spring 2026**

# Agenda

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- Why communication drives student decisions
- Where communication breaks down for students
- How to design proactive, student-centered messaging
- How to amplify your message through campus partnerships
- Practical changes you can implement immediately



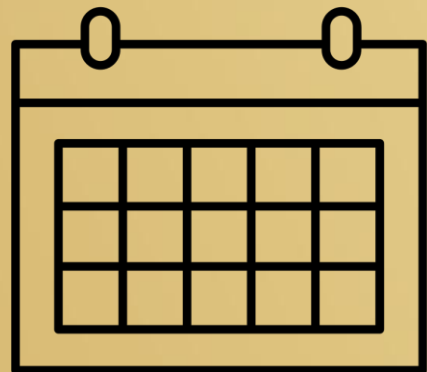
# My Role: financial aid communication strategist

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## Digital/Print Strategy:

Website, large-scale email communication, financial aid forms, outreach handouts, social media, analytics



## Mass Email/Marketing Campaigns:

Dispatch (mass communication tool), FAFSA Renewal for current students, paid Carver Scholarship promotion



## Campus Partnership Efforts:

Connections strengthen outreach, align messaging across departments, and ensure students receive clear, consistent financial aid info



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# Why Communication Matters

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## Communication shapes college decisions

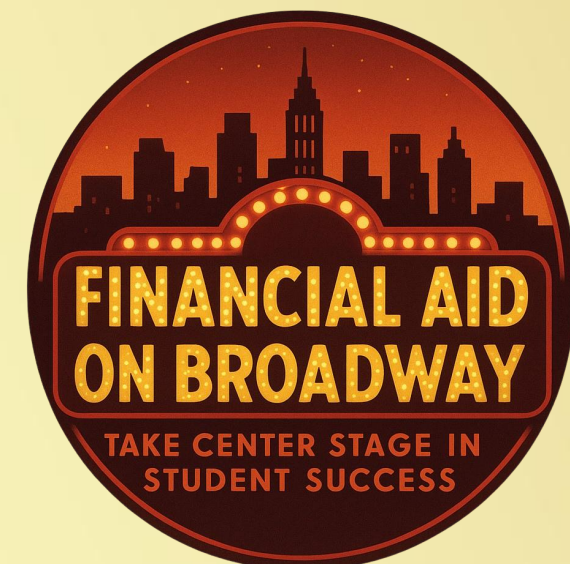


**96%**

Nearly all families think the quality of the school's communication with parents and families influences their college planning decisions.

Image:  
RNL 2025  
Prospective Family  
Engagement Report

Communication is not just support; it is part of how families evaluate your institution.



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# Families Are Telling Us What They Want

They want clear, timely, consistent communication

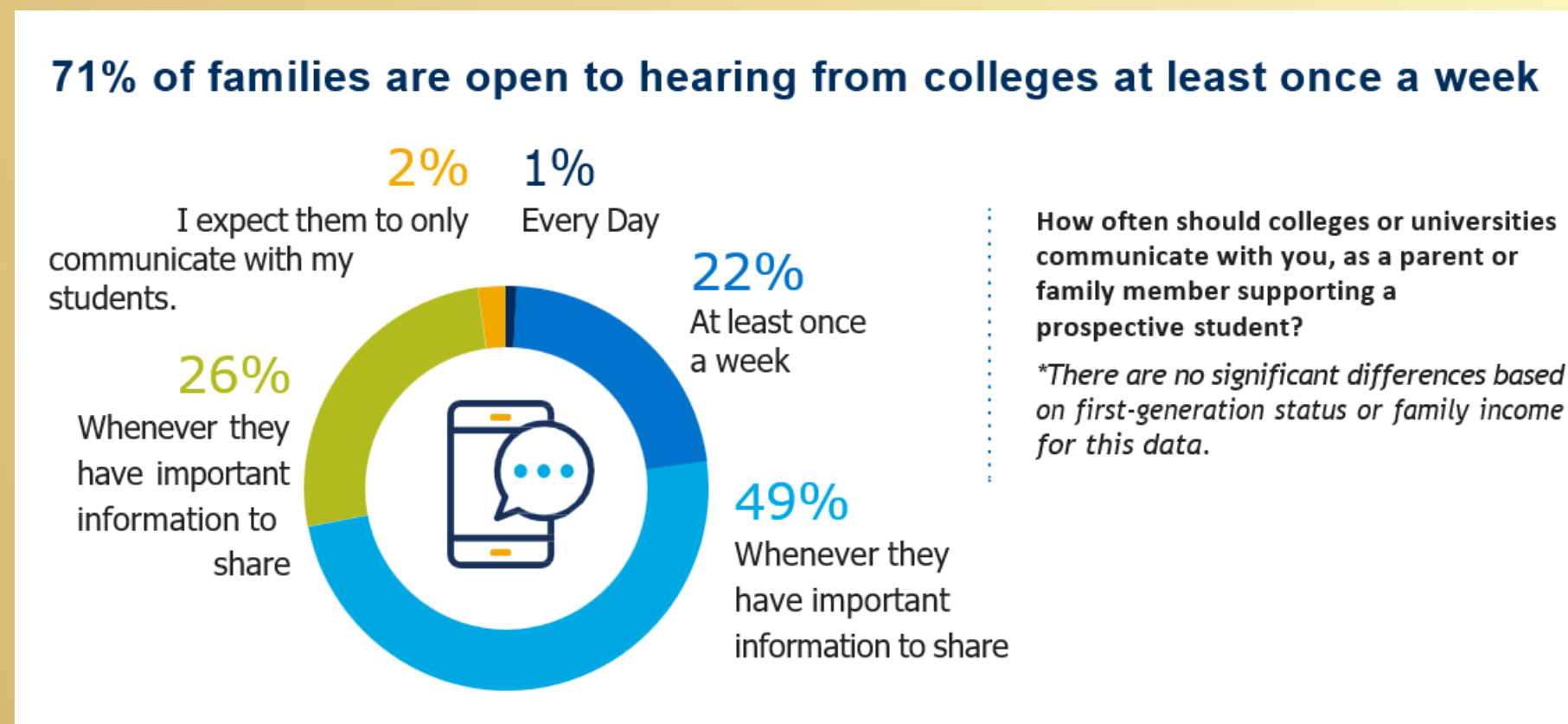
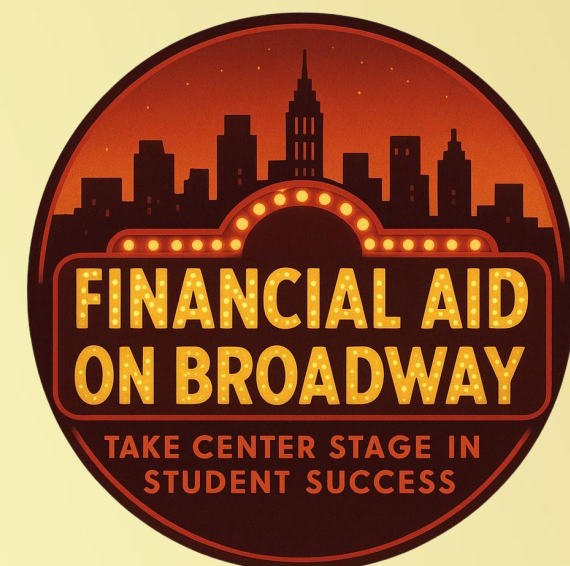


Image & stats:  
RNL 2025  
Prospective Family  
Engagement Report

- Email is still the TOP PREFERRED channel (90%)
- Texts are underused but increasingly preferred (30%)



# The Real Problem Isn't Volume; it's Clarity

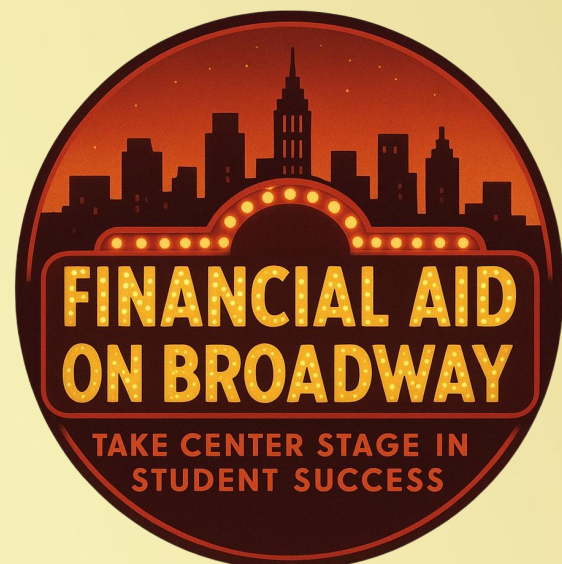
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## Families cannot find or understand key information

- 98% say financial aid info is important
- 38% don't know where to find it
- For some income groups the gap is even higher

Stats:

RNL 2025 Prospective Family Engagement Report



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# Communication Has Real Consequences

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When communication fails, students walk away.

- Families eliminate schools when they cannot understand cost
- Communication is a top factor in college selection
- Lack of clarity leads to assumptions, not always positive

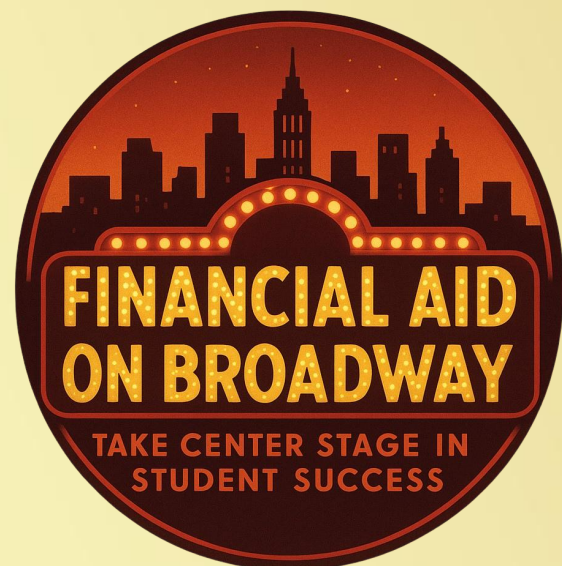
Stats:

RNL 2025 Prospective Family Engagement Report



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If nearly every family is telling us communication matters, and many still cannot find what they need, then the issue is not whether we communicate. It is how.

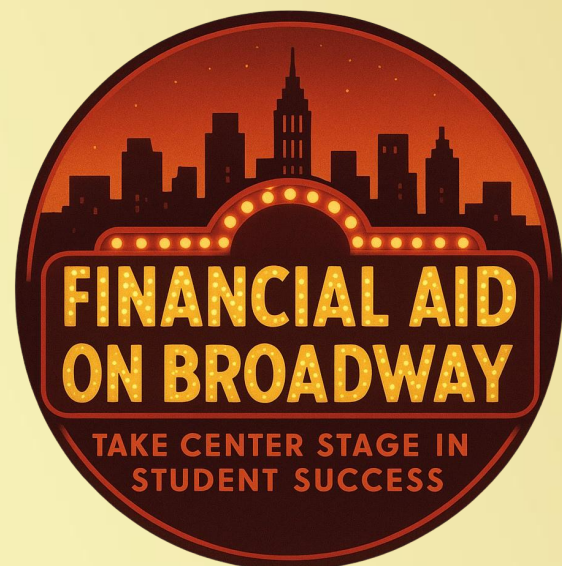


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# Common Breakdown Points

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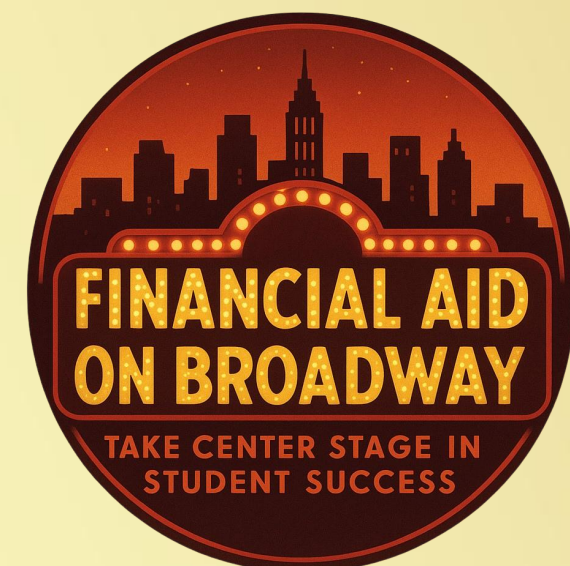
- Messages are reactive
- Information lives in silos
- Language is too complex
- Channels are not aligned
- Students must piece things together



# The Student Experience

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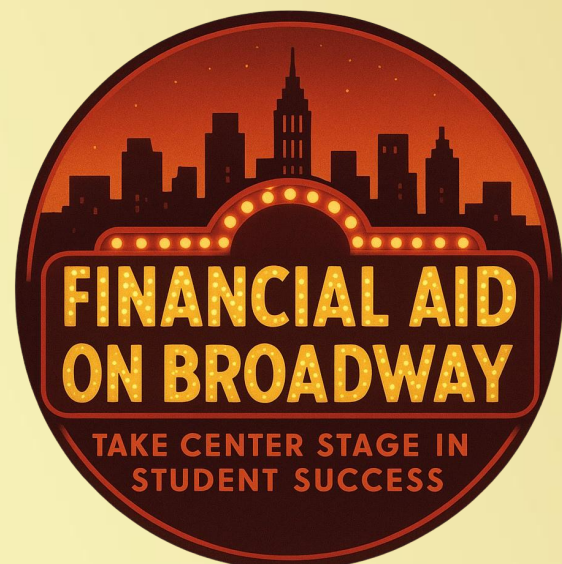
- Multiple emails that do not connect
- Website that answers only part of the question
- Conflicting information across staff or offices
- No clear "what to do next"



# Four Moves to Improve Communications

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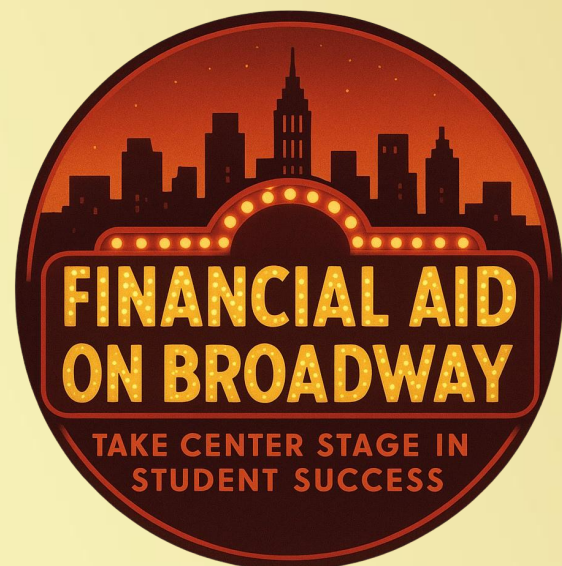
- Be proactive
- Align your message across every channel
- Design for clarity and accessibility
- Use data and partnerships



# Communication Power Move #1

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**Be Proactive**

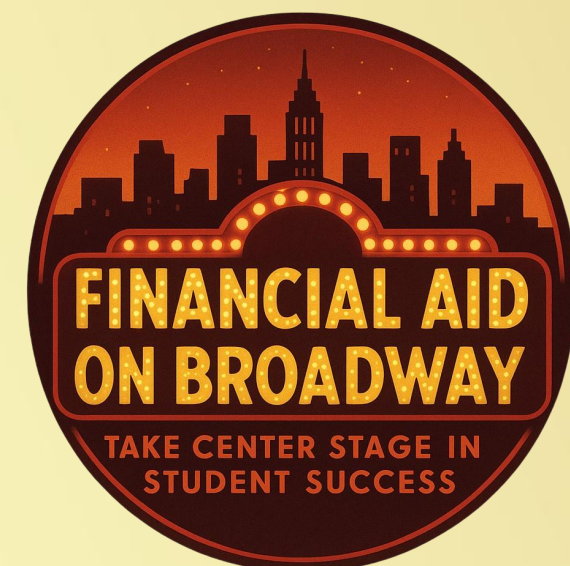


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# Stop Waiting for Questions

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- Most questions are predictable
- They follow the student lifecycle
- If you wait for questions, you are already behind



# Think Ahead to Summer/Fall 2026

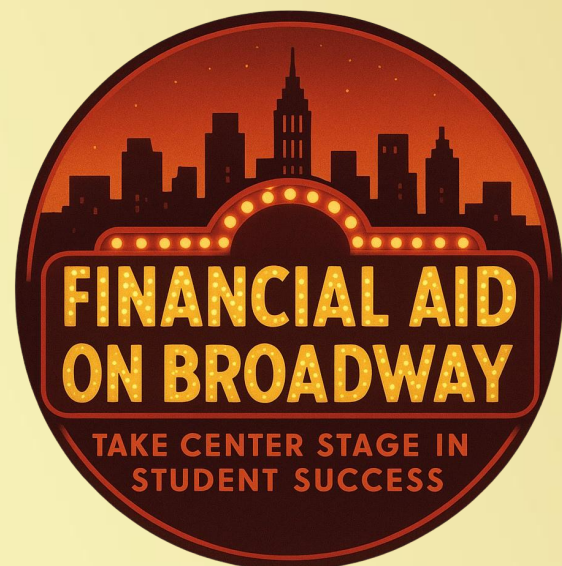
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Plan around what students are about to experience.

- What is happening around this time?
- What do students need to know?

**The key:**

Your communication strategy should mirror the student experience.



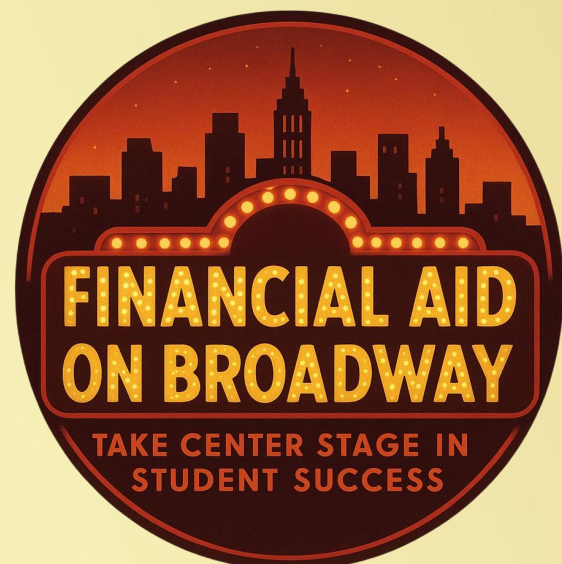
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# Building a Communication Timeline

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For each moment, define:

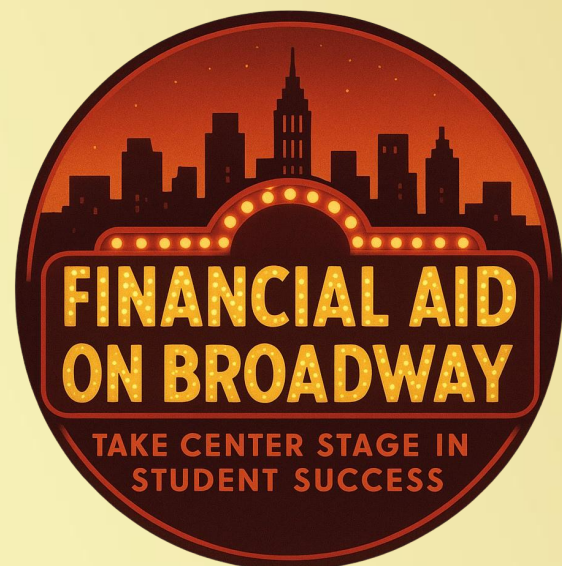
- What is happening
- What students need to understand
- What action they need to take
- When they need to take it



# Student Moment: Summer Orientation/Onboarding

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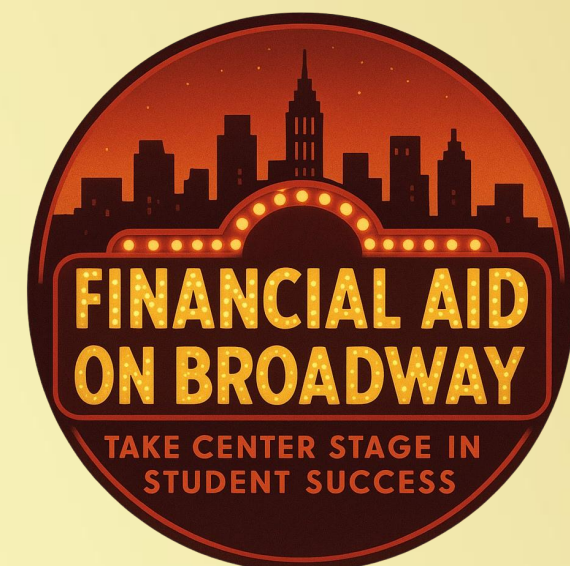
- **Timeframe:** May–July
- **Student moment:** Preparing to start, overwhelmed, new systems
- **What they need:** Clear steps, where to go, what to complete first
- **Key action:** Complete To Do List, understand financial aid offer, options to pay Ubill, completing private loan counseling



# Student Moment: Loan Acceptance and Requirements

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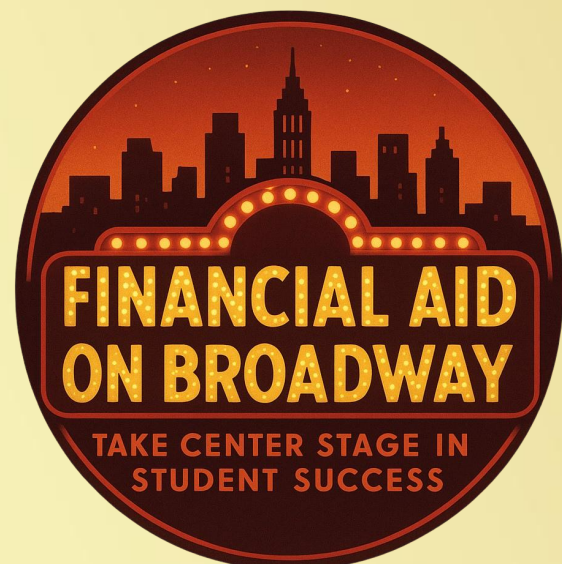
- **Timeframe:** May–August, sometimes ongoing 😊
- **Student moment:** Reviewing aid, unsure about loans
- **What they need:** What loans mean, how to accept, requirements
- **Key action:** Accept, reduce, or decline loans



# Student Moment: School Begins & Enrollment Changes

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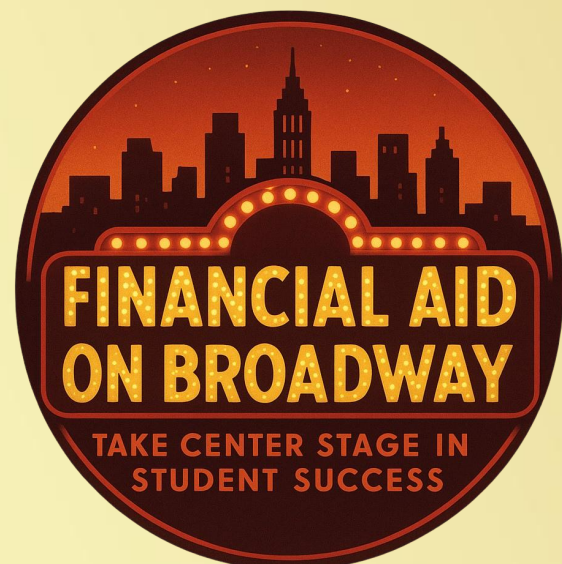
- **Timeframe:** August–September
- **Student moment:** Schedule changes, dropping/adding classes
- **What they need:** How changes affect aid
- **Key action:** Review aid after enrollment changes



# Student Moment: Census Date & Aid Adjustments

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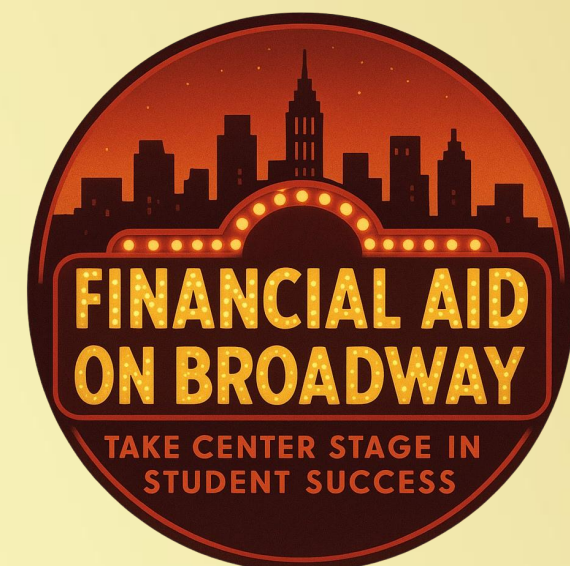
- **Timeframe:** Early September
- **Student moment:** Enrollment locks, aid recalculates
- **What they need:** What census date is, what changes after
- **Key action:** Finalize schedule before census



# Communication Power Move #2

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**Align Your Message Across  
Every Channel**



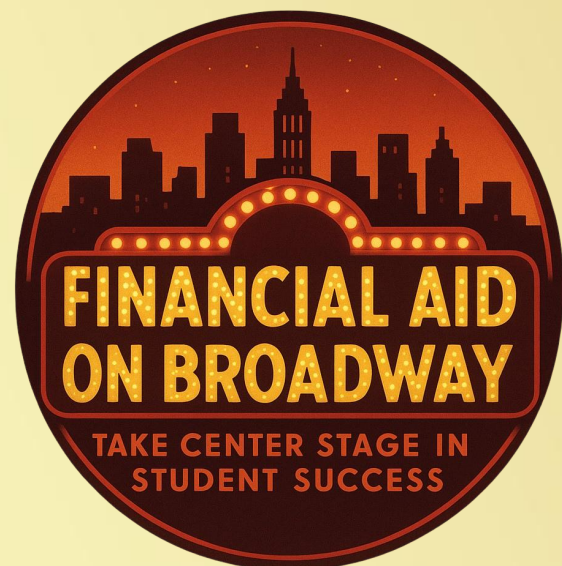
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# Layer Communication Across Channels

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All channels should align

- Website
- Email
- Social (if used)
- Advisors/student staff answering emails, phone calls, and drop-in questions



# The Website Clarity Test

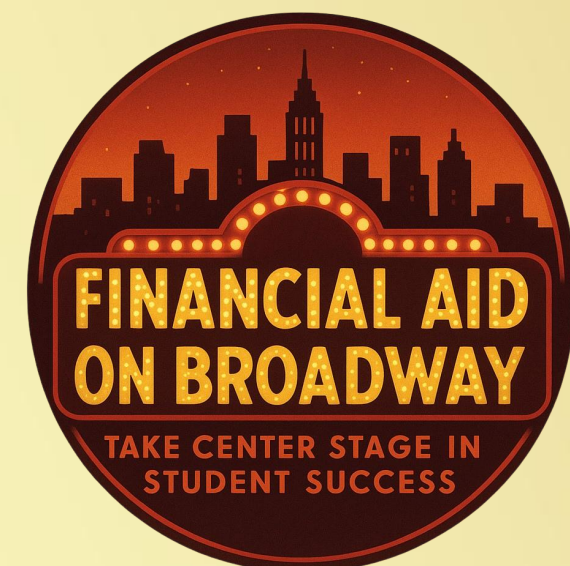
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## Your website should:

- Be easy to navigate
- Be up to date
- Use simple, clear language

## If students cannot find or understand the answer:

- They call
- They email
- Or they do nothing



# UI OSFA Website – Our Digital Front Door

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## Then (prior to site launch)

- 250+ pages, multiple clicks deep
- Confusing navigation
- Inconsistent language and tone
- Inconsistent with UI branding
- Not viewed as a trusted resource

## Now (launched July 2024)

- ~60 pages, most one or two click deep
- Streamlined, student-centered content
- Hidden pages triggered by To Do List (segmentation in practice!)
- Annual updates before FAFSA opens, cost is finalized by BOR & when aid offers go out

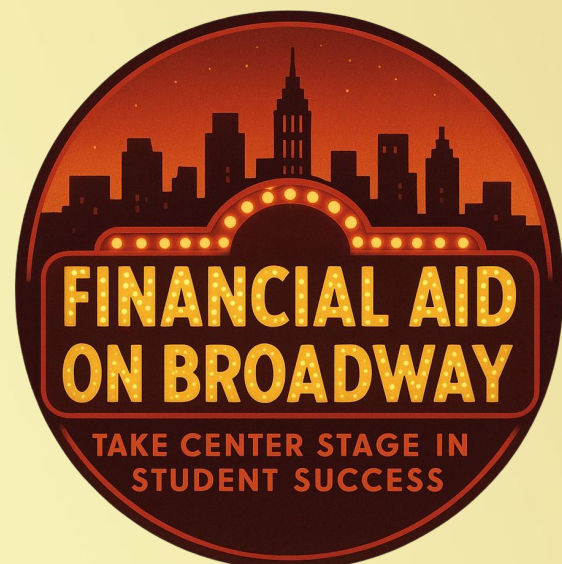
# The Email Clarity Test

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Every message should answer:

- What is this?
- Why does it matter?
- What do I do next?
- By when?

If it does not answer these, students will get stuck.



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# The Meat Of Your Message Should Be Clear

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**Subject: FINAL REMINDER: File Your 2026-27 FAFSA By Dec. 1**

This is your final reminder to file your 2026–27 [FAFSA](#) if you haven't yet. If it's already submitted, you can ignore this email.

Remember, financial aid isn't automatically renewed—you need to reapply each year. Some aid is limited and offered on a first-come, first-served basis.

Submit your FAFSA by **December 1, 2025**, to maximize your financial aid opportunities.

**File your FAFSA by Dec. 1 for maximum financial aid consideration! →**

# Practical Use of Additional Information Section

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SAME EMAIL, but below the "Meat of the Message"

## **Why should you file your FAFSA by the deadline for financial aid consideration?**

It is in your best interest to file the FAFSA as soon as possible after it opens **each year**. Some financial aid programs have limited funding and deadline requirements. Although you can apply for financial aid throughout the year, funding for some programs may be depleted. For example, if you file the FAFSA after the University of Iowa's deadline for maximum aid consideration, you may meet the qualifications for certain types of aid, but not be offered that aid because the funding has run out.

Learn more about [Applying for Aid](#) at the University of Iowa.

# Segmentation in Practice

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You are receiving this message because you applied to a graduate or professional program at the University of Iowa that may begin in Fall 2026 or Spring 2027.

We are writing to make you aware of changes to federal loan borrowing that may impact your student financial aid.

Recent legislation has led to the elimination of the Graduate PLUS loan borrowing program and has also changed the borrowing limits for the Unsubsidized Stafford Loan. This has significantly changed financing options for graduate and professional programs. You can find more information about these [changes on our website](#).

We encourage you to review these changes as soon as possible so you can determine if you will need to borrow more than the Unsubsidized Stafford Loan limit each year to fund your education. If you need more than the Unsubsidized loan limit, you may need to consider a supplemental private loan. Private loans may be difficult to obtain and may have an unfavorable interest rate, depending on your credit history, so setting up a financial plan early will be important. You can find more information on [private loans on our website](#).

**Email sent to  
Admitted  
Grad/Professional  
Students on  
3/12/26**

**Subject Line:  
NOTICE: Federal Loan  
Changes That May  
Impact Graduate  
Funding**

**Sent to: 2,635 students  
Open rate: 2,195 (83.3%)**

# Use Social Media to Raise Awareness

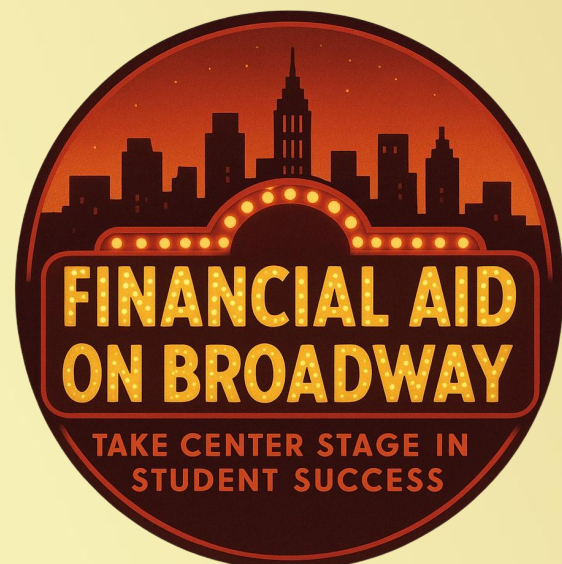
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## Social media should:

- Build awareness
- Reinforce key messages
- Reach students where they already are


## You do not need a large following to have impact.

- Many views come from non-followers
- Content is shared by partner offices
- Messages reach targeted student groups



# Social Media Example

It's time to file  
your 2026–2027  
**FAFSA**



Deadline for maximum aid  
consideration is December 1, 2025

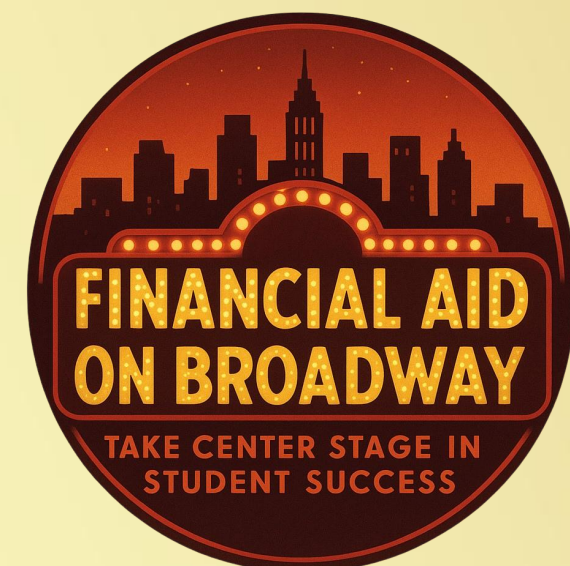
→ **STUDENTAID.GOV**

**IOWA**  
Student Financial Aid

 uifinancialaid FAFSA season is here. The 2026–27 FAFSA is open! File by December 1, 2025, for full financial aid consideration. Start now at [studentaid.gov](https://studentaid.gov).

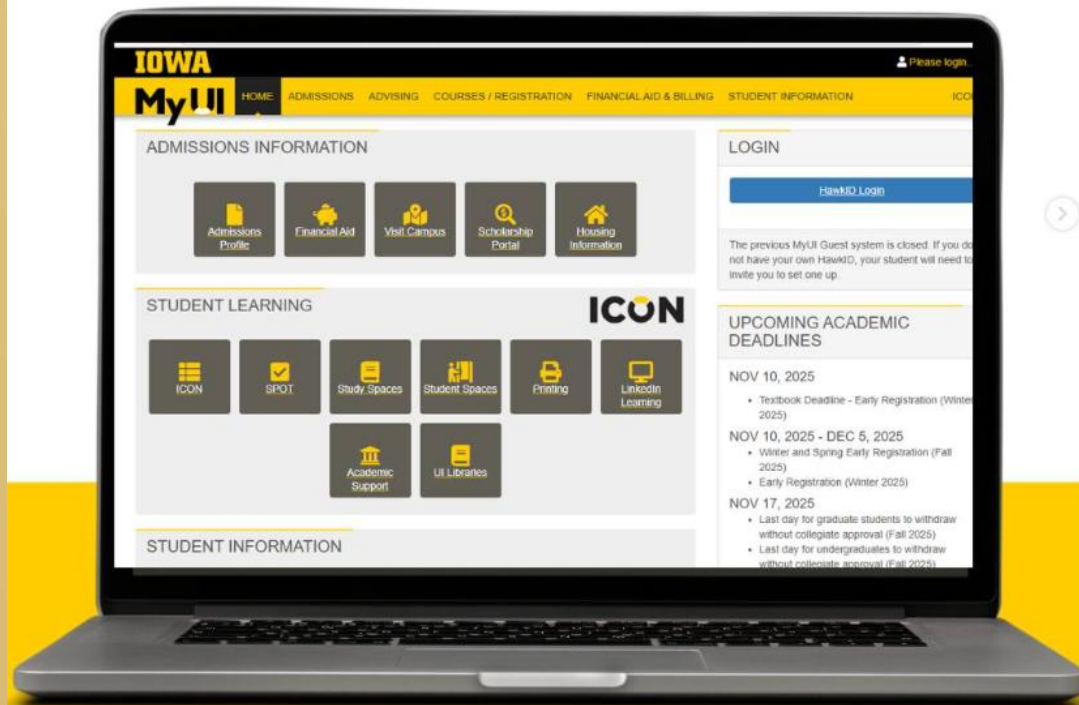
[#FileYourFAFSA](#) [#UIFinancialAid](#)

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# Social Media Example: Where to Find To Do List

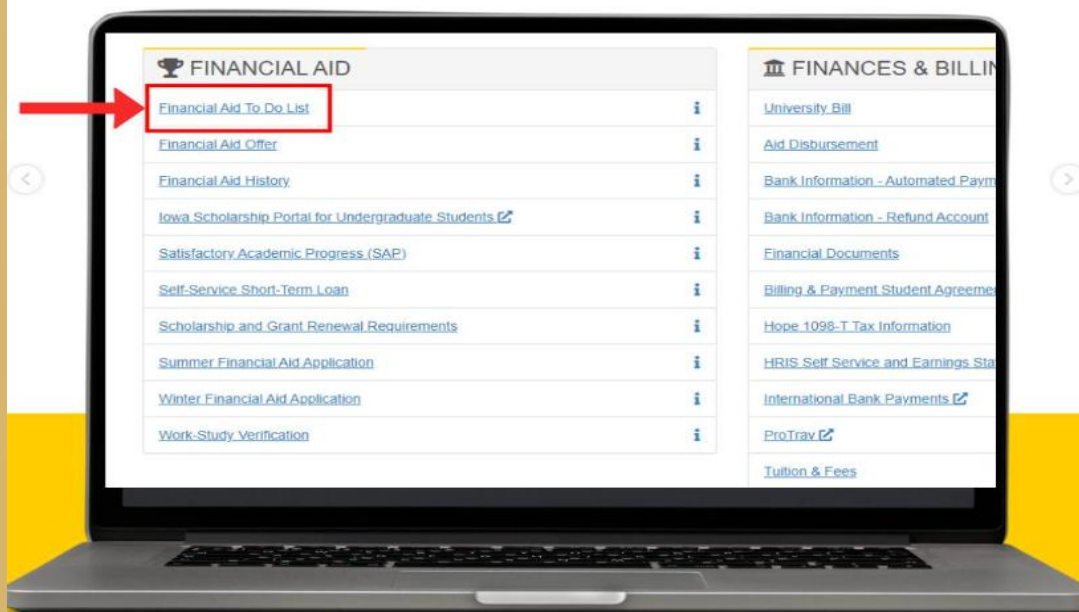
## ① Log into MyUI



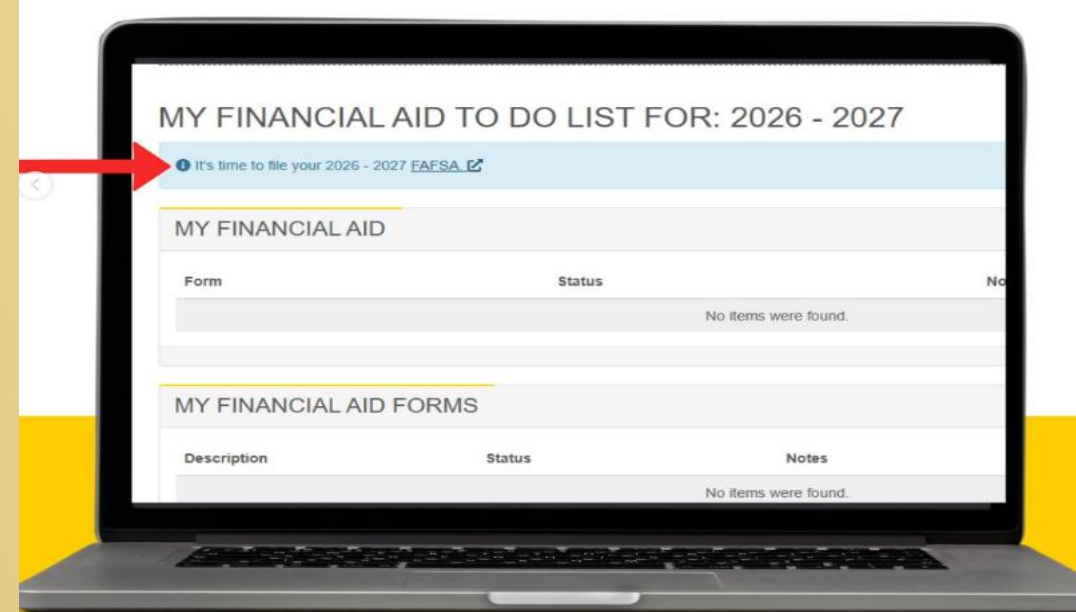
## ② Financial Aid & Billing Tab



## ③ Financial Aid To Do List Button



## ④ Submit any required information



uifinancialaid Here's how to access your Financial Aid To Do List and keep everything up to date:

- 1 Log in to MyUI – your hub for all things student life and finances.
- 2 Click the Financial Aid & Billing tab at the top of the page.
- 3 Select the Financial Aid To Do List button (it's the first option!) to see exactly what's required from you.
- 4 Complete and submit any required information to make sure your financial aid stays on track and you don't miss deadlines.

This list shows all the tasks and documents needed to maintain your financial aid eligibility. Checking it regularly can help you avoid missed deadlines or incomplete submissions.

#UIFinancialAid

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# Align Your Front-Line Messaging

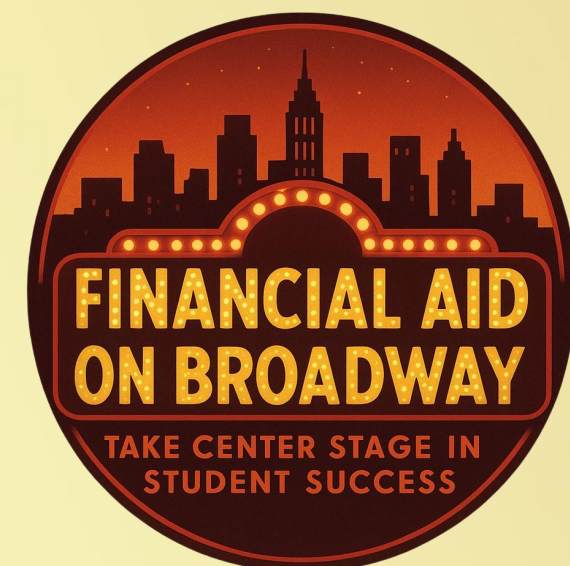
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Your front-line staff are your message in action:

- Phone
- Email
- In person

When staff are aligned:

- Answers are consistent
- Students get clear direction faster
- Confusion decreases



# Front-Line Messaging Samples

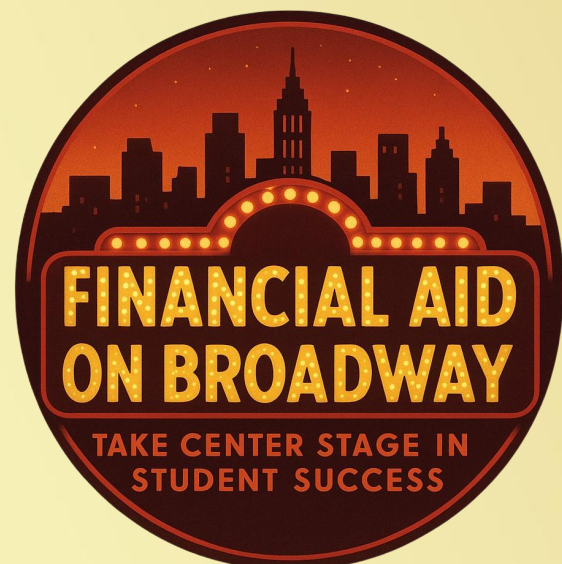
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## What this looks like

- Develop talking points for key processes
- Share with student staff and full-time staff
- Ensure student staff can answer common questions

## Tools that support consistency

- Outlook Quick Parts for common responses
- Auto-replies updated with key deadlines and reminders
- Weekly review of challenging cases
- Adjust messaging based on where confusion shows up



# Communication Power Move #3

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Design for clarity and  
accessibility



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# Balance Compliance with Accessibility

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## ACCESSIBLE

- Correct structure in emails & website
- Use of Alt-Text
- Use of captions

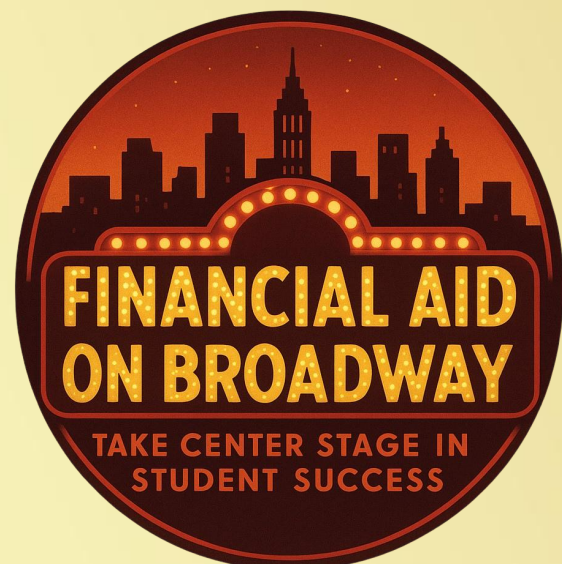
## PLAIN

- Identify audience
- Organize content
- Write clearly

## CONCISE

- Remove filler phrases
- Remove unnecessary information

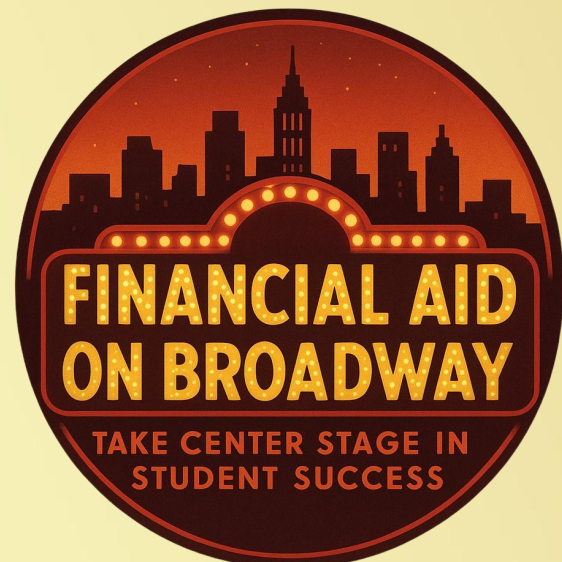
Resource: [Plain Language Quick Reference Guide](#)



# What This Looks Like In Practice

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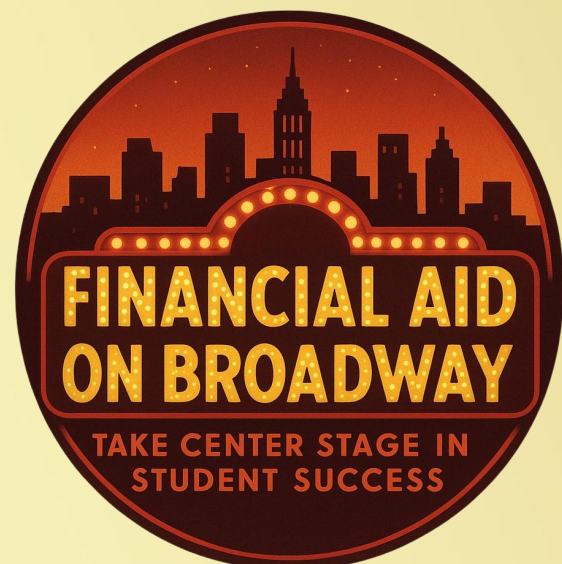
- Plain-language summary
- Break up dense content
- Call-to-Action subject lines
- Use of clear headings
- Highlight action steps (buttons are great!)



# Use AI to Your Advantage

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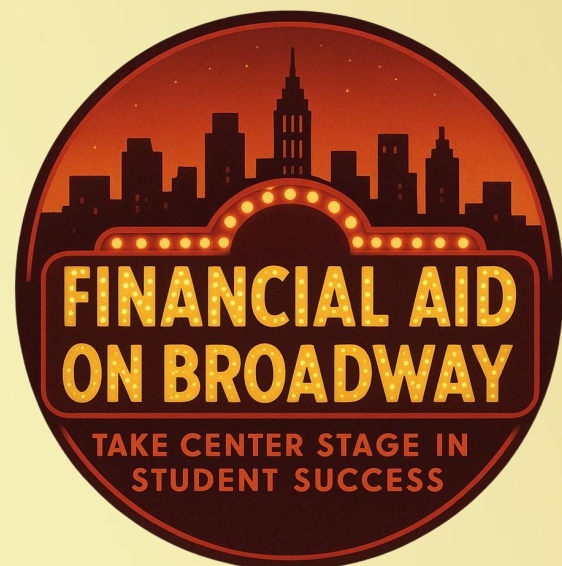
- Roles & Voice Prompt Examples
  - Rewrite this text to be as simple and direct as possible. Aim for an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. Avoid complex, jargon-heavy language.
  - Convert this text from passive to active voice.
  - Break this text down in the simplest way possible, as if teaching someone for the first time.
  - Create an action-forward subject line.



# Communication Power Move #4

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## Use Data and Campus Partnerships

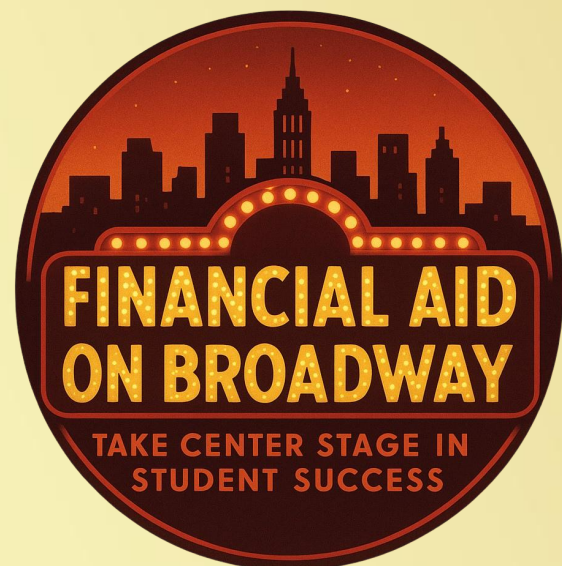


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# Use What You Already Have

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- Review past email engagement
- Revisit common questions you get
- Look at website behavior = what pages are getting looked at and when?
- Front-line feedback = gold!

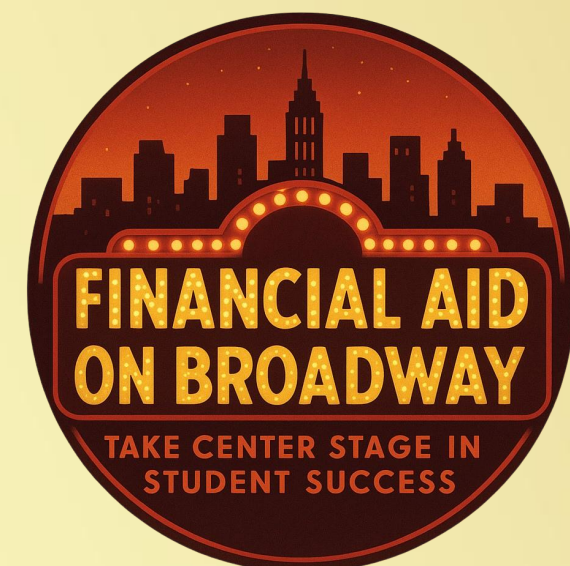


# Data Point Samples to Follow

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Review one or two metrics monthly such as:

- top clicked links in campaign emails
- repeat email replies
- peak call times
- Open rates for different subject lines

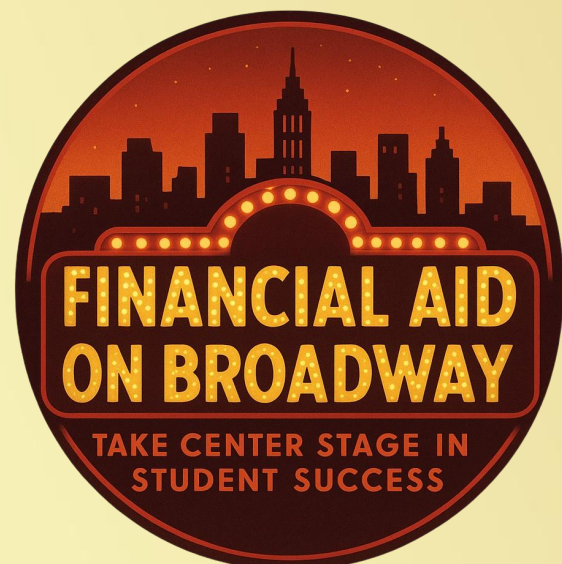


# Amplify Through Campus Partnerships

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Your office is not the only place students get information.

- Partner offices extend reach
- Consistent messaging builds trust



# Partnership Example: Admissions Social Collab



**iowaadmissions and uifinancialaid**  
University of Iowa

**iowaadmissions** Hawkeyes, the 2024-2025 FAFSA will be available by December 31.

Start your process today by creating your FSA ID.

[#uiowa](#) [#iowacity](#) [#futurehawkeye](#)

118w

**angelagarrey** Please, please be patient with financial aid staff during this rollout. ❤️

118w 3 likes Reply

— View replies (1)

❤️ 💬 ↻ 📌

**iowaadmissions** Liked by **iasfaa1** and 494 others

December 28, 2023

😊 Add a comment... [Post](#)

# Partnership Example: Stu Gov't Social Collab

**IOWA** Undergraduate Student Government

FAQs ABOUT THE FAFSA

uifinancialaid

uifinancialaid The FAFSA filing deadline for maximum financial aid consideration at the University of Iowa is February 15, 2024. Swipe through to learn more about the process!

#faidfeb @uifinancialaid

111w

Liked by uiowafirstgen and 51 others

February 12, 2024

Add a comment...

Post

# Partnership Example: College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

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- Inclusion in October 2025 Student Newsletter
- [Website Listicle](#)
- Social Media Collab Post

## **Five FAFSA tips every Hawkeye should know**

Thursday, October 30, 2025

The 2026–27 Free Application for Federal Student Aid is open! File by Dec. 1 to stay eligible or be considered for need-based aid. Dec. 1 is also the priority submission deadline to be considered for maximum aid.

# Partnership Example: Parent & Family Programs

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- Current Parent/Supporter-focused Webinar
- [Website Listicle](#)



## **Iowa Parent and Family Program Webinar: Financial Aid and FAFSA Tips**

**Date:** Thursday, October 9, 2025

**Time:** noon - 1 p.m. CST

**Description:** Join Haley Hollern, Associate Director for Iowa Parent and Family Programs and staff from our Office of Student Financial Aid to learn more about financial aid at Iowa. We'll cover the basics, walk through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and share important updates and deadlines to help support you and your Hawkeye. You'll have the opportunity to ask questions and learn about resources available to you, including a FAFSA tips guide with action steps to help you maximize your financial aid consideration for the 2026-2027 year.

# Partnership Example: Student Life

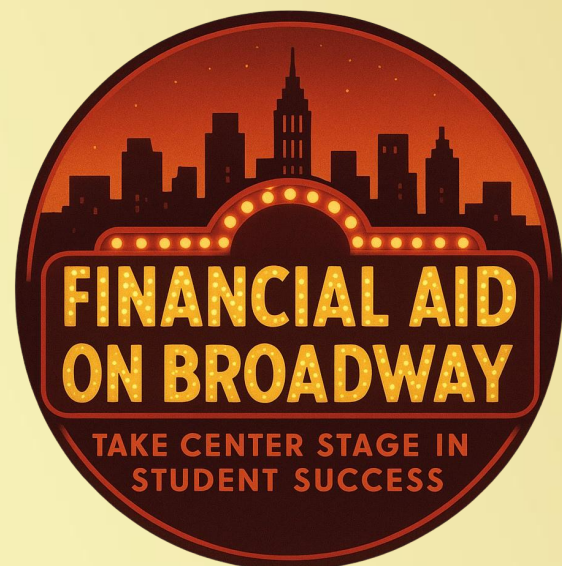
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- This has been on my collab wish list for awhile!
- Upcoming collabs (April/May):
  - Student newsletter
  - Parent newsletter
  - Student Life website
  - Student Life social media account
- Topics:
  - Upcoming federal loan changes impacting undergrad students and their supporters
  - Importance of building & maintaining credit, impact on post-grad borrowing options

# What Better Communication Does

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- Reduces confusion
- Builds trust
- Improves decision-making
- Supports enrollment and retention

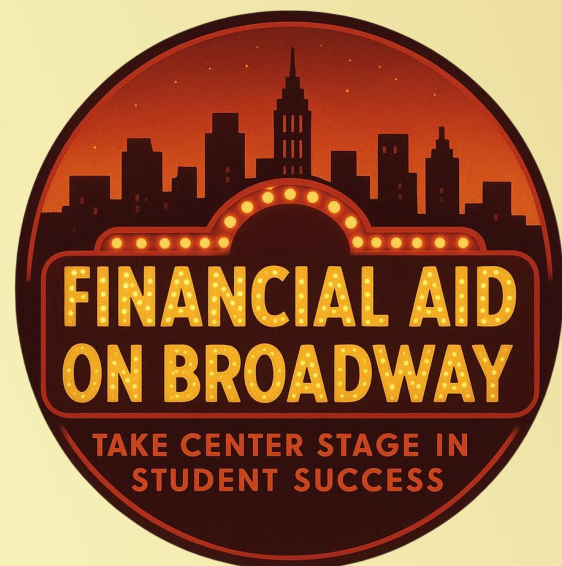


# Quick Wins – These work at any institution size

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## Simple changes you can make now:

- replace jargon
- simplify language on website/in emails
- break messages into steps
- focus each email on one goal/action
- add clear deadlines
- use consistent language
- reuse messaging across campus partners

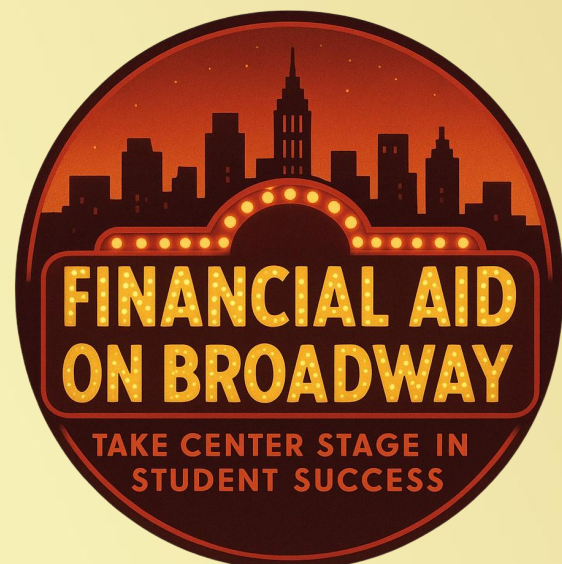


# Final Takeaways

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## Three things to remember

1. Communication is customer service
2. Student questions reveal gaps
3. Small changes create big impact



# Questions?

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